
MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



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Photograph by Derick Nelson Jenkins, MD, see page 32

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An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts

When reading this Spring/Summer edition of VCU's *Medical Literary Messenger*, I am struck by reflection—how art reflects life, how the end reflects the beginning, and what we choose to reflect upon when we experience medicine as patients or professionals. Please enjoy what I consider to be some of the finest visual art and photography featured in our publication thus far, as well as poetry and prose bursting with imagery and feeling. May it offer you the same time for reflection that it offered me.

Megan Lemay, MD | Associate Editor

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Exposure

Each winter there's one sparrow on the ledge,
alone, that shivers more than all the rest
perched bobbing on their colony of sedge.
That it won't last a day seems manifest,
but morning dawns and he or she is back
again, plumped up against the cold and wet,
and pecking at the millet and the black
sunflower seed strewn on the parapet.
We might consider this lone sparrow death,
or fear of death, or wish for death, exposed,
indeed, half-frozen last breath,
but claws and beak still grip. It's death deposed.
And then comes spring and all the flock seems new
and never lets on which ones made it through.

By Dan Campion

Dan Campion is the author of Peter De Vries and Surrealism, co-editor of Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song, and contributor of poetry to many magazines, including Able Muse, Harmony, Light, Measure, The North American Review, Poetry, Rolling Stone, and Shenandoah. A native of Chicago with degrees from the University of Chicago (AB), the University of Illinois at Chicago (MA), and the University of Iowa (PhD), he works as a writer and editor in Iowa City, Iowa.

The Second Floor Shop B



Photo by Hil Scott

Incubator Memory

101.5 degrees Fahrenheit. Turn the eggs
at least six times a day and I can't remember

despite the chart. Rooster named after
Grandpa Henry, who got up in winter to make

warm mash for the chickens.
In brain surgery a doctor forgot

to replace the temporal bone
of a man's head and his brains later bulged

through the hole in ways not even
the MRI could make sense of.

They forgot to reattach
the bone before sewing him up?

To remedy, another go round
with scalpels and knives,

a new bone borrowed from a donkey pelvis,
cheaper than a real human bone.

HMO plans, you know.
Who could forget

the specificity of love?
What was it then? Not love but

rote. Not routine but retail.
But none matters more

than the eggs, you see,
warming under the heat bulbs

in styrofoam incubator.
I am a very bad farmer and forget.

Someone calls to remind me
to reinsert the important pieces.

Don't frame them here. Far out
in memory

the largest rooster
takes on a name.

By Meridian Johnson

Meridian Johnson is the author of Kinesthesia, a full-length poetry collection (New Rivers Press 2010). Her poems and essays have appeared in AGNI, Borderlands, Beloit Poetry Journal, Dislocate, Gettysburg Review, Massachusetts's Review, NPR's On Being, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Minnesota with a graduate minor in Complementary and Alternative Therapies (CAM) and a BA in English from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. She is a biodynamic craniosacral therapist serving the communities of Santa Fe and Los Alamos, New Mexico. Her website is www.meridianjohnson.com.

Take Me to Richmond



Destination Unknown



**Photos by
Derick Nelson Jenkins, MD**

*Derick N. Jenkins is a Chief
Medical Resident at VCU Health
Systems .*

Symmetry



Photo by Derick Nelson Jenkins*

*See photographer's note, page 6.

The Aide

By Erika D. Price

“We went as far as the car would take us,” Radhiyaa said into the phone. Diana was kicking at the dash and ignoring the clipped, incomprehensible words coming out of the speaker.

“Yeah,” Radhiyaa said into the phone, “Yeah. The water, it’s too high. It’s. No. There’s no way. Yeah.”

Diana’s father, Brian, was yelling meaningless, overly practical advice at her but refusing to actually leave work early and pick the girls up. And Radhiyaa knew, after five years of acquaintance with the man, that there was no reasoning or reassuring him, no way to get him to shut up—she just had to let him speak his peace and then get off the line as soon as possible. So she let him go on like that and looked ahead, where the murky river water slapped against the hood of the vehicle.

They went as far across the bridge as they could, which wasn’t as far as Radhiyaa had thought—she’d been able to ford the river plenty of times, but that was in her dad’s Jeep, after the short water burst of a summer storm. Those storms didn’t deposit all that much water, really; they just looked ferocious for the few moments they came down. But now it was spring, bone-chilling April, and the melting snow and slush was mixing with the rain that had been going at a steady spray for twenty hours now, goddammit it, and the river was flooded and the car was stuck.

“Goddammit,” Diana kept saying,

slamming her soft, broad palms on the glass of the passenger’s side window. “Goddammit,” followed by a deep, wet-sounding sigh.

Radhiyaa said good-bye to Diana’s father and hung the phone up. Then she stared at Diana’s face, pleading for advice and forgiveness. A plan. Diana always had a plan for how the girls would spend their time.

Diana, with the thick brow bone and the inscrutably pissed-off eyes. Radhiyaa didn’t understand how people could look in those eyes and think that Diana was simple, that her personhood was attenuated in some way. It was all because of her heavy electric wheelchair. It would be different if the chair was a manual, Diana told Radhiyaa once. If her disability were different, if her chair were manual, then Diana would have strong arms and a powerful, sinewy chest. It would make her look leanly muscular and capable and thus, to most people’s minds, halfway smart.

But she wasn’t in a manual. She was in an electric, and so strangers came up to her at restaurants and malls and spoke in very slow, loud voices, telling her they were proud. “Look at you sitting up so straight! Do you want a sticker?” a woman at her community college had said once.

“I want a ravenous grizzly bear that will carry me around and eat people who ask me shit like that,” was what Diana had said.

Diana was full of imagined scenarios that served only to get her pissed off. How tall she would be if she could stand. How much money should would

“It would be different if the chair was a manual, Diana told Radhiyaa once. If her disability were different, if her chair were manual, then Diana would have strong arms and a powerful, sinewy chest. It would make her look leanly muscular and capable and thus, to most people’s minds, halfway smart.”

make if her arms didn’t tire from four hours of work. Where they would be, by now, if the car hadn’t sunk into the water.

“What did he say?” Diana spat finally, frustration making her tongue thick.

“He said to put it in neutral and get out, try to pull it back out the way we came,” Radhiyaa said.

Diana scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Impossible. How deep is the water anyways?”

Radhiyaa rolled the window and leaned far out, her chest, neck, and head all the way out of the car. There was a black sedan behind them. It sat idling for a while, the unseen driver watching the girls in their peril but not helping.

Radhiyaa leaned as far as she

Continued, next page

could safely go and, with a shudder of hesitation, plunged her arm into the water. She felt around in the muck. The water was dark but not quite muddy; the river was still flowing along on either side of them. The car had gotten about halfway across the low bridge before the river swept under the wheel bearings and the engine groaned off.

Diana was still scoffing. Radhiyaa opened the door and shoved her foot into the dark wet deep. Then she rose to a standing position, her faux-leather boots absolutely soaked and filled with cold muck.

"What are you—" Diana said, but there was the answer to her question, standing and staring right at her. Two and a half feet of water, enough to pass her aide's knees.

"The car will just slide forward into the river if I put it in neutral," Radhiyaa said. She felt calm, now that she was soaked. The water came down from above, too, soaking her headscarf and sweater. "Your chair makes the car too heavy."

Diana pinched the bridge of her nose and said, "I know, I know. So what do we do?"

Radhiyaa was already walking around the back of Diana's dad's Aero-star. She slid the big back door open, letting water splatter the fuzzy grey carpet, and began unhooking the clamps that held the wheelchair in place.

"What, are you crazy?" Diana said. She covered the controls of her chair possessively, fiercely. "I can't go out in that!"

Her aide shrugged and lowered the ramp. "Come on, it's not so deep," she

coaxed. "We'll take the road back up to Bagley."

Diana hesitated a moment, staring down at the river that flowed under and around the vehicle. Most of the ramp was above the surface of the water, and the bridge was on a steep-ish incline, so the road behind them was high and relatively dry.

"This is a \$3,000 fuckup," Diana told Radhiyaa, and followed her into the water and back the way they had come.

Radhiyaa had been Diana's aide since the middle of high school. An unlikely pair at first, Diana being a militant atheist and Radhiyaa the president of the Muslim Students Coalition, they were seated together in health class and became fast friends.

On the day that the health teacher discussed contraceptive options, Diana had turned to Radhiyaa and said, "It's funny, we're both getting ignored equal amounts."

Radhiyaa had drawn back and whispered, "What do you mean?"

"Well," Diana said, thinking, "Everybody assumes that people in wheelchairs don't have sex. They think there's no reason for a sad little sexless baby angel like me to even be here. And they assume you're like betrothed to some guy, and you're a total prude who'll never have an orgasm in her life. But they're wrong on both."

"I don't know what you mean," Radhiyaa whispered, but she could feel her face smiling and her cheeks heating up, which sent Diana into sharp, bitter-sounding guffaws.

The health instructor came by and shot them a look, but he walked away

just as quickly and never came back, even as the two girls continued talking. As the class wore on and condoms were passed out, Radhiyaa and Diana's row never got any, and so Radhiyaa got to thinking that maybe Diana was right. They talked on and on, as the condoms were rolled over bananas, as the images of chlamydia-infected genitals were projected on the walls, as the Christian kids raised their hands to talk about their virginity pledges. They talked and Diana snickered loudly, without reservation, and nobody scolded them, because they were perfect sexless baby angels.

The bell rang, and Diana yelled out, "Excuse me Mr. Thornbush, do you have any dental dams though? Me and Miss Hasan would really like some. It's kind of an emergency."

That was when Radhiyaa first felt pulled into Diana's orbit.

The girls pushed through the water and reached the top of the road. This part of the Metroparks had wide, steep streets abutted by thick forest, and there were no paths or sidewalks they could access. The ground was too muddy for Diana's weighty chair. Radhiyaa nodded to the hill that careened up through the side streets, leading to Fowles Road. From there they could make their way to Bagley and Diana's apartment.

"I can't climb that fucking hill," Diana told her. "I'm at half battery."

Radhiyaa sighed and stepped behind the chair. She took a firm grip and leaned her chest in, pressing against where Diana's Batz Maru backpack

Continued, next page

hung.

"I'll help push," she said. She adjusted her hijab. "We probably won't die."

A car came down the hill and rushed past them. It drove partway through a puddle and splattered Diana in the face and Radhiyaa in the chest as it went by. The rubber handles of the chair became slippery in Radhiyaa's hands.

"FUCK—" Diana began, but then Radhiyaa laughed instead, clutching at her face and reaching over the seat to touch her friend.

A year after the health class incident, Radhiyaa finished up her State Tested Nurse's Aide certification. Diana just so happened to be in desperate need of after-school help. Her old aide had retired and her father had picked up a second job in the evenings; there were no wheelchair-accessible buses in the school district, and Diana was hell-bent on not taking school transport. So she hired Radhiyaa.

It was a fun, easy job at first. Radhiyaa couldn't believe her good luck. She got her own set of keys to Brian's van, got to drive to and from school every day. Even better, she relished the opportunity to brush off her helicoptering parents—helping Diana was a permanent alibi, an excuse to stay out late after school, a way to meet boys or to slip away to concerts. If Radhiyaa was being honest, she relished any opportunity to get out of the house.

And Diana was the perfect client. She had a thick binder full of CDs in the front of the van, loaded with cool, pissed-off seeming music that Radhiyaa had never heard. Diana always had

*"Are you doin' okay?" Diana asked.
Radhiyaa sputtered, 'Yes!' and pushed harder, faster,
knowing they had nowhere to go but up; there was
nothing else they could do. If she let go and the chair
tumbled backward, they both would be wrecked."*

cash for McDonald's or Starbucks; her appetite for food and pleasure was insurmountable; she was endlessly chatty and bitchy in a way that attracted and disgusted Radhiyaa all at once. All Diana ever wanted to do was cruise the town, sipping Frappuccinos and yelling at the boys and girls on the cross country team as they ran alongside the road.

"WOO YEAH, NICE ASSES!" Diana would yell. "Tell them Radi, tell them what nice asses they have!"

Radhiyaa would press a fry to her lips, pretend to think, and then daintily roll the window down. She'd force the words out like vomit, "NICE SHORTS! WE CAN SEE YOUR SCROTE, DUDE!" and Diana would laugh and laugh.

As they went up the hill, another car came up from behind them. Radhiyaa strained into the chair, her calves burning, sweat pouring from her armpits, rain drumming on her head. Diana had the chair on its safest speed and pushed the joystick all the way forward.

"Are you doin' okay?" Diana asked.

Radhiyaa sputtered, "Yes!" and pushed harder, faster, knowing they had nowhere to go but up; there was nothing else they could do. If she let go and the chair tumbled backward, they both would be wrecked.

The car cut close as it drove up behind them. The mirror nearly clipped Diana on the head; she ducked and let out a funny-sounding "Oof!" at the surprise.

A red-headed kid with an oversized cap was looking back at them from the passenger's side window. At the last moment before the car disappeared over the hill he looked at Radhiyaa and said, raising his eyebrows, "Hey, nice ass!"

Radhiyaa couldn't stop to scream at him, or even contemplate it and be pissed off. She just looked down and pushed forward, puffing air past her lips.

In the car, it would have taken fifteen minutes to get to Diana's apartment. Once there, Radhiyaa would have helped Diana use the bathroom, maybe showered her, then she would have dropped the keys on the kitchen table and gone out for the bus. She would have been home by eight at the latest. Now, as they walked through the gravel and mud to Fowles Road, past the big historical houses and the barn with the fat horses, both girls agreed it would be an hour or two.

"Call your mom," Diana said. "She'll be off soon right?"

Radhiyaa shook her head. "It's Tuesday. She has patients coming till eight."

Continued, next page

Ever since her parent's divorce, Radhiyaa's mom spent as many nights and weekends as she could at her practice. They were shedding money; it came off them both in big wads, or so it seemed. Radhiyaa had been working as many hours with Diana as possible. Five years out, it wasn't so fun anymore.

They went around the corner where a sidewalk began at last. The glow of the shopping center was beckoning them from far down the street; otherwise the road was unlit, the sidewalk dangerously sloping and bumpy in places. Houses with long, dark green lawns flanked them on either side. All was still and quiet except for the lapping of the rain on their heads and shoulders.

Diana's needs had waxed and waned until one day they eclipsed Radhiyaa's life. Brian worked later and later, struggling to support them, so there was no one around to get Diana undressed for bed. Radhiyaa started doing it with her head turned away and her stomach flexed tight. She was afraid to see her friend's nakedness, afraid of what she might feel, good or bad.

But once that barrier had been breached, more came crashing down. One day Diana invited Radhiyaa on a shopping trip. They took the big changing room, filled it up with clothes for both of them. Radhiyaa dressed and undressed Diana a dozen times, and the mirrors were everywhere so there was no avoiding it. Then Radhiyaa stripped too. Diana advised Radhiyaa to buy a red midi skirt with gold piping and a green scarf embroidered with

peacocks and chickens. At the cashier she passed her credit card over the pile of both their clothes, not saying a word. Radhiyaa felt grateful, but with a pang of dull guilt.

After that came helping Diana use the bathroom. Then came helping Diana use her catheter, hooking Diana up to her breathing machine at night, and driving Diana to doctors visits. Radhiyaa helped lift Diana into the hospital beds, slid bed pans beneath her, rolled Diana's t-shirt up so the echocardiogram technologist could get a good position.

It was hard to resent, since every demanding hour was paid. And sometimes, Diana just wanted to drive around or sit in her living room and watch *America's Next Top Model* or *Survivor* reruns while sipping her dad's Svedka. And Radhiyaa loved her friend. Sometimes, she'd take a sip or two of the vodka, pull the ottoman up real close to Diana's chair, and let her head rest on Diana's shoulder.

Sometimes, it was lovely to know someone so intimately. Radhiyaa began to sense and anticipate Diana's bodily needs. She learned how often Diana needed to pee, how long it took after having a drink. Radhiyaa's body began to tense up and ache when Diana's body grew stiff. She began to get sleepy as she watched her friend slip into un-

consciousness under the relaxing hum of the breathing machine. Diana's needs became Radhiyaa's needs; their lives took on the same arduous pace. An insult to Diana's intelligence was like a slap in Radhiyaa's face.

The years went on like that. And all of a sudden, Diana and Radhiyaa were the only people in their graduating class who still lived at home.

They walked past the strip malls. The massage parlor with the dark windows, the oil change place, the little jewelry store, the brightly lit but

crowded store that sold Precious Moments figurines.

"This fucking blows," Diana said. She shivered. Radhiyaa went to drape her jacket on her, "No. Don't do that."

"I'm fine, I'm plenty warm," Radhiyaa said.

"No you're not."

"I am! I am! Look at you!"

Radhiyaa pinched

Diana's forearm. It was covered in goose bumps. "See?"

Diana crossed her arms and looked out into the street. "I'm fine. I'm the one that decided not to wear a sweater, I should suffer."

Diana was always getting cold lately. She shivered in air conditioned rooms or when there was a breeze or a fan on.

"Sometimes, it was lovely to know someone so intimately. Radhiyaa began to sense and anticipate Diana's bodily needs. She learned how often Diana needed to pee, how long it took after having a drink. Radhiyaa's body began to tense up and ache when Diana's body grew stiff."

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At her last five doctors appointments, her blood count had been low. That was the way it went with these conditions. Radhiyaa knew she was supposed to emotionally prepare for it, to anticipate a slow, piecemeal decline, but she hadn't.

"You didn't know you'd be walking this far in the rain," Radhiyaa said, and pushed the jacket forward. "And it's my fault the car is stuck. Take it. Come on."

Diana shook her head. "It's hideous and I don't want it. Oxblood pleather? No way Radi."

Radhiyaa had the jacket balled up in her hands. She said, "Oh? You don't want it because it's ugly? So I should just fling it in this puddle, then?"

She stopped and dangled the jacket over the curb. Maybe it was out of style, but Radhiyaa had worn the jacket since senior year and Diana had never said a thing. The side of the road was a rushing, loud stream. The jacket might even be swept away a few blocks if she dropped it down.

"I mean, go ahead," Diana told her.

"Oh yeah? It's so ugly that you would rather freeze than wear it? You'd rather see it on the side of the road?"

Her teeth clenched, Diana said, "I'd rather not see it at all."

Radhiyaa almost let it drop. She almost let them both freeze. But she could hear Diana's chattering teeth, see her body clenching and unclenching, and it made her so pissed that she stomped over and dropped it on Diana's lap.

"You're not going to die over this!" she yelled, her voice almost hysterical. The older she got, the more intent-

ly she focused on Diana's health, the more Radhiyaa reminded herself of her mother. That was the part she resented most. Not the time, not the occasional grossness of the job, but the caring that had stuffed her mind and heart full so there was no room for anything else.

A few days after graduation, Radhiyaa and Diana had both gone to a bonfire party. It was Radhiyaa's day off, and Diana had another aide there, a middle-aged woman who spoke very little and filled her solo cup over and over again with rum punch. Radhiyaa forced herself to stand by the fire, out in the lawn where Diana's chair could not go. Diana was stuck on the deck. But it was Radhiyaa's day off, and high school was done, and a pretty boy with a mole on his cheek was smiling at her and asking where she'd be going for college.

Even with her back turned to Diana, Radhiyaa could sense that her friend's bladder was full and that she was freezing. It had been an unseasonably chilly May night. She was about to tell the boy she'd been accepted at Chapel Hill and that she wanted to study pre-med, but then she turned and saw Diana in the flickering porch lights, her fingers nearly blue.

And Radhiyaa had gone up and draped her jacket over her friend's lap. And later, when Diana's aide proved too drunk to drive, Radhiyaa had lowered the van's ramp and driven her home. On the way out she'd kissed the boy on the cheek and said that she was staying in town for a few years. Going to the community college, working for Diana while she got her associate degree.

That night Radhiyaa had lifted Di-

ana into bed and shushed her while she moaned and apologized.

"I'm sorry," Diana sputtered, her eyes not looking angry at all, just red and vacant. "I didn't mean to ruin your night."

"Stop it," Radhiyaa told her, stroking her forehead. "I decided to do this."

"Don't be a fucking martyr," Diana said. "You have your own life, Hasan."

So Radhiyaa leaned in and kissed her full on the mouth.

"I know," she whispered into Diana's lips.

When Diana's father, Brian, finally came home, it was 11:30 p.m. Diana was in the bedroom in her night gown, the breathing machine hooked up to her face, pumping air loudly with Radhiyaa curled up in a ball beside it. Radhiyaa was wearing a long t-shirt that belonged to Diana, her wet hair wrapped up in a towel. The shower was still misty, the bathroom still humid. Diana and Radhiyaa's wet clothes were strewn all around the room, the Batz Maru backpack had become a pillow for Radhiyaa's head.

Brian picked up Radhiyaa's jacket, which was bunched up at the foot of Diana's bed. Then he bent down and grazed Radhiyaa's shoulder with his index and middle finger. She sprung awake immediately, her brown eyes big like walnuts.

"Radi," he whispered over the humming of the machine, "It's late. We need to go pick up the car."

The girl nodded and rose. She slipped on a pair of flip-flops (also Diana's), put on her hijab, and followed

Continued, next page

him to the apartment complex's parking garage, yawning and wiping crust from the corners of her mouth. Brian stood next to his car waiting for her. "What are you looking at?" she said.

He gave a fake little laugh and rubbed at his thinning grey hair. "We don't pay you enough," he told her.

Radhiyaa made a wry little smile and slipped into the vehicle. "Don't worry about it."

They drove into the park, Brian's headlights cutting through the shadowy trees. As they neared the flooded bridge, the car came upon two deer standing in the middle of the road. One was thick in the middle with an unborn fawn. Brian slowed, still idling forward, and the pregnant fawn loped away, the younger, sprightlier deer trailing after it.

He parked the vehicle and they slunk into the water. Radhiyaa winced at the cold but pressed on, the t-shirt trailing behind her in the water. Brian slipped off his shoes and went barefoot. They stood in water up to their waists at the front of the car, nodded in the darkness, and pushed with all they had.

The Aerostar barely budged at first, then Brian let out a low, oddly youthful groan and leaned down lower, and it began to roll up. They huffed and leaned in, and Radhiyaa imagined she was pushing Diana's chair up the hill again. A few inches of ground were lost to them as Radhiyaa stumbled on the pavement, the sandals failing to find purchase. Brian looked at her, concerned, his hair rumpled and wild, but Radhiyaa did not let it phase her.

"Diana was always calling Radhiyaa up first thing in the morning, saying they should go exploring in the park. They drove around for hours, watching the trees whip past, screaming at runners, sipping coffee or Snapple lemonade and amusing each other."

"Keep going," she yelled, and they pushed and groaned and sweated until the van curved up off the bridge, onto the relative dryness of the road. They stood there, hands on hips, breathing and smiling at each other.

Radhiyaa dangled the keys in her hand. "I'll drive it back to the apartment and then you'll give me a ride home, yeah?"

Brian nodded. He rumbled his hair. Then something in the girl's face caught his attention. He grew contemplative. "No," he said. "No, you take it home. You're the only one that uses it anymore."

Radhiyaa's shoulders dropped an inch, and she nodded.

"You're coming back tomorrow anyway, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. Yeah."

"I mean, you're practically the only aide she works with anymore..." he stared into the woods.

The Metroparks were densely populated with deer, black squirrels, possums, ducks, the occasional fox. It was unlit, dangerous going at night. He avoided the park roads altogether. But the girls loved driving there. Diana was always calling Radhiyaa up first thing in the morning, saying they should go exploring in the park. They drove around for hours, watching the trees whip past, screaming at runners, sipping coffee or Snapple

lemonade and amusing each other. It was a massive waste of gas, at a time when Brian could seldom afford it, on top of Radhiyaa's hourly expense. But something told Brian it was worth it. So he'd never said anything.

"You're the only one that drives the damn thing," he said to her. "And you could get to our house quicker if you had it. Why don't you keep it?"

Radhiyaa nodded, avoiding eye contact. Then she brightened a little, and her nodding became more vigorous.

"I mean," Brian said, "It's the family car, I always said. And you're like, or you could be, part of the family."

She gave him one more nod, brisk and almost businesslike, and slipped into the car. He was impressed at her three-point turn and how swiftly she disappeared into the dark as she drove away. At the next traffic light, he was behind her and could see the glow of her phone as she stared down at it. When he returned to the apartment, he peered in on his daughter and found her awake, breathing through the tube, staring down at her phone smiling, her thumbs pecking away excitedly. ✧

Erika Price is a writer and social psychologist in Chicago. Erika's work has appeared in Bacopa Literary Review, Literary Orphans, The Toast, and The Rumpus and has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize. For more of Erika's writing, visit erikadprice.tumblr.com.

Subconscious



Artwork by David Yoffe

What My Uncle is Thinking

Inside his head
he sees one at a time.
He hears the voices
but none are his or mine.

When too many
people and sounds
come to him
he gets afraid and hides.

But right now he
sits there, calm
reading with my
grandmother as I watch.

And when they
finish, I sit up and ask
“Uncle, what are you thinking?”
He looks at me.

As he is rocking
back and forth
I know exactly what he is thinking,
Because he is my uncle.

By Tamsyn Brennan

Tamsyn Brennan is a social worker who lives in Nova Scotia, Canada. She is the co-founder of The Friends of Gilda's Nova Scotia, working to bring Gilda's Club and the Cancer Support Community to Atlantic Canadians affected by cancer.

Progression

Four words, a sentence.
Nothing as bold as a paragraph.
Her hazel eyes cautious,
lids fold as she speaks each word,
reading the brain's map like Braille.
What she might trade for one night
of cohesion, semblance, an effortless
strand of linear thoughts.

By year eight, the stages spill
her agency like scattering children,
and a family prepares to unhinge,
to witness medicine in reverse
dole out clumsy efforts to contain
an inevitable stall.

Familiar looks vanish
behind blank synapses,
each tangled morass of nerves
twists like fishing line, until
words sleep, trapped
between blocks of ice.
We talk the way a record skips.
We break apart for years.

By E. F. Schraeder

E. F. Schraeder's creative work has appeared in Four Chambers, Glitterwolf, Slink Chunk Press, Hoax, Lavender Review: Poems From the First Five Years, and other journals and anthologies. Author of a poetry chapbook, The Hunger Tree, Schraeder has an interdisciplinary PhD emphasizing ethics and a certificate of advanced studies of bioethics. Find more online at efschraeder.com.

Waiting

The house a
waiting room
for his crying.
Our bodies in
slow burn.

My time is worm.
My boy needs
now &
always
always will.

By Justin Nicholes

*Justin Nicholes is the author of the novels River Dragon Sky (2012) and Ash Dogs (2008). His stories and poetry have appeared in The Saint Ann's Review, *82 Review, The Grief Diaries, American Poets Abroad, and elsewhere.*

Only 1,482 Steps From the Massey Cancer Center Entrance



Photo by Dodge Havens

Looking upstream toward Mayo Island Bridge.

As a long time canoeist, after treatments, scans, and doctor visits, Dodge Havens enjoys walking the 1,482 steps from the Massey Cancer Center to the 14th Street Takeout to take a look at the river. It is amazing that this natural beauty is so close by. The photographer encourages everyone to take the steps to see it.

At Hardy-Owen Funeral Home, *Conveniently Located on Dixie Highway*

He looks very good—we nod
in agreement. Dead, my father looks
younger, much less than 85,
much more than dead.
Parkinson's smoothed his forehead,
ironing out the furrows.
They glue the eyes shut
to prevent surprises.

My sister found him where he'd fallen,
half on the chair, soiling himself.
Everything lets go then—the body
surrendering to the present.

She claims there was a sigh—I wouldn't know,
I wasn't there. CPR just expels old air.
He was gone, like he always was
before he returned.

So here we are, murmuring words
my mother does not understand.
She speaks in German, forgetting
where and when she is.
In this world of hushed tones
obscenities hover on my tongue.

My father's hands are swollen, nails trimmed.
I stroke the refrigerated skin,
as if anything I can do
would change much of anything at all.

By Monique Kluczykowski

Monique Kluczykowski is a Pushcart-nominated poet, former professor of English, and world wanderer who now lives in Iowa City. Her most recent poems appear in StepAway Magazine, Cactus Heart, The Magnolia Review, and Two Cities Review, and she has a short story forthcoming in The Examined Life Journal.

After the Diagnosis

Upstairs, the belly of the tub swells on brass claws —
tarnished talons clutching the oak floorboards

as they have for decades. The window
is closed and the porcelain bowl, heavy,

filled to the lip. Heat rises, feathers
into the room, fogs the glass as she lowers

into the mirror the blue pool makes, swallows
her own body — begins with toes, then hips,

the full weight of her breasts pulled
under. She slips the soap over her shoulders,

slides the bar over the blades of her back, bends
to wash the dirt from her feet. The harsh fur

of her shins stands as the water holds her,
as she sinks into another skin. Each day,

he asks how she feels, suggests she lie down,
but she does not remember the last time

he touched her, the last time his hand
grazed hers in the dark. She wraps the water

around her chest and imagines the griffin —
wings spread wide, paws beating the ground

before lifting into the wind, two half-bodies
devoured: not wholly of earth or of sky.

By Chelsea Krieg

Chelsea Krieg is a graduate of North Carolina State University's MFA program. Her poetry appears in Bellevue Literary Review, The McNeese Review, and elsewhere.

A Journey of a Thousand Steps



Photo by Leslie Bobb

He is almost 14 years old, in many ways beginning his adult life. As I watch him learning to become a man, I see him walking away from me. The adventure he is about to embark on is one he will walk alone.

This picture was taken on a cross country road trip my son and I took for Christmas. It may be the last vacation he takes as a child. I see in this picture the road ahead of him, the clouds he must pass under, and the blue skies in the distance.

Leslie Bobb is Executive Assistant to the Chair of Internal Medicine at VCU and a Certified Integrative Health Coach outside of VCU. She loves to travel with her son. This photo was taken on a recent road trip across the United States.

Average Worries

By John Davis Jr.

Believe me. They're all you want when the blue-gloved paramedics wheel your stretcher in and lay you up in the rough-pillowed, bleach-sheeted hospital bed. It has guard rails like shiny-clean prison bars, and your reflection wraps and warps around them. Everything seems longer and blurrier.

At night, you squint out the window and envy all the normal people eating microwave dinners, preparing for the routines of another workday tomorrow. The IV machine beeps. The blood pressure cuff fills, squeezes, releases with a sigh.

Maybe you skipped a dose or two of seizure meds. Maybe there was too much stress, positive or negative. Maybe you ran a fever fighting some minor sickness. Whatever the cause, you're here now, surrounded by those who care most. They stare as if waiting for the next round of the freak show to start. They don't mean it that way, but you perceive it that way for them. You'd stare too, were things reversed.

But now, in between drips and measures, you realize again how lucky those silhouettes in yellow-lit windows are—busing dishes off to a sink, hustling

children to baths and beds, sacking up trash or finishing homework or watching the stupid news.

None of that for you tonight. Just a clear bag of liquid valium, an occasional visit from a rough-handed nurse, and, of course, the incessant, meant-well questions from nears and dears: How are you feeling? Are you okay? Do you need anything?

For a flicker, you consider a smart-ass response, but the drugs have you too cloudy and too slurred to respond with much besides, "I'm good." Like hell you are.

The night sky beyond the hospital fills with stars, but the fluorescent glare of your white square room suffocates anything natural. At least you can still see the passing cars, and again, those silhouettes: shadows of taken-for-granted ordinary life.

You run some quick numbers and figure out you're up to a mean of three per month now. Sometimes the ambulance is called, sometimes you're taken by car to save money. That gets messy.

You've never asked, "Why me?" This is all you've ever known. Tonight, though, a different question comes to mind: Why not them? Why not the black shifting shapes beyond the parking lot? Who are they to enjoy concerns

over a new boss, an older car, or the brown spots on their otherwise overgrown lawns?

Let them lie here and get chlorine rash. Let their families pester them with welfare questions. Let their friends pay too much for another insipid balloon bouquet from the lobby gift shop. Better yet, let their spouses and young children drink sympathy soda from Styrofoam cups at midnight, awakened by an innocuous twitch or twinge that could mean more, but doesn't.

No, don't.

You wouldn't wish this on anybody.

Traffic grows sparse outside, and one by one, the warm windows of the neighborhood go black. The shadow puppet show is over, and you remember your mother's voice from childhood bedtimes: ...the Smiths are asleep, the Johnsons are asleep, the Crosses are asleep, and now you are asleep. ✧

John Davis Jr. is a Florida writer and educator. His nonfiction has previously appeared in educational journals including The Independent Teacher and Florida English Journal. His poetry has been published in literary venues internationally, and he holds an MFA from the University of Tampa. His book, Middle Class American Proverb (Negative Capability Press, 2014), is available through all major retailers.

"But now, in between drips and measures, you realize again how lucky those silhouettes in yellow-lit windows are—busing dishes off to a sink, hustling children to baths and beds, sacking up trash or finishing homework or watching the stupid news."

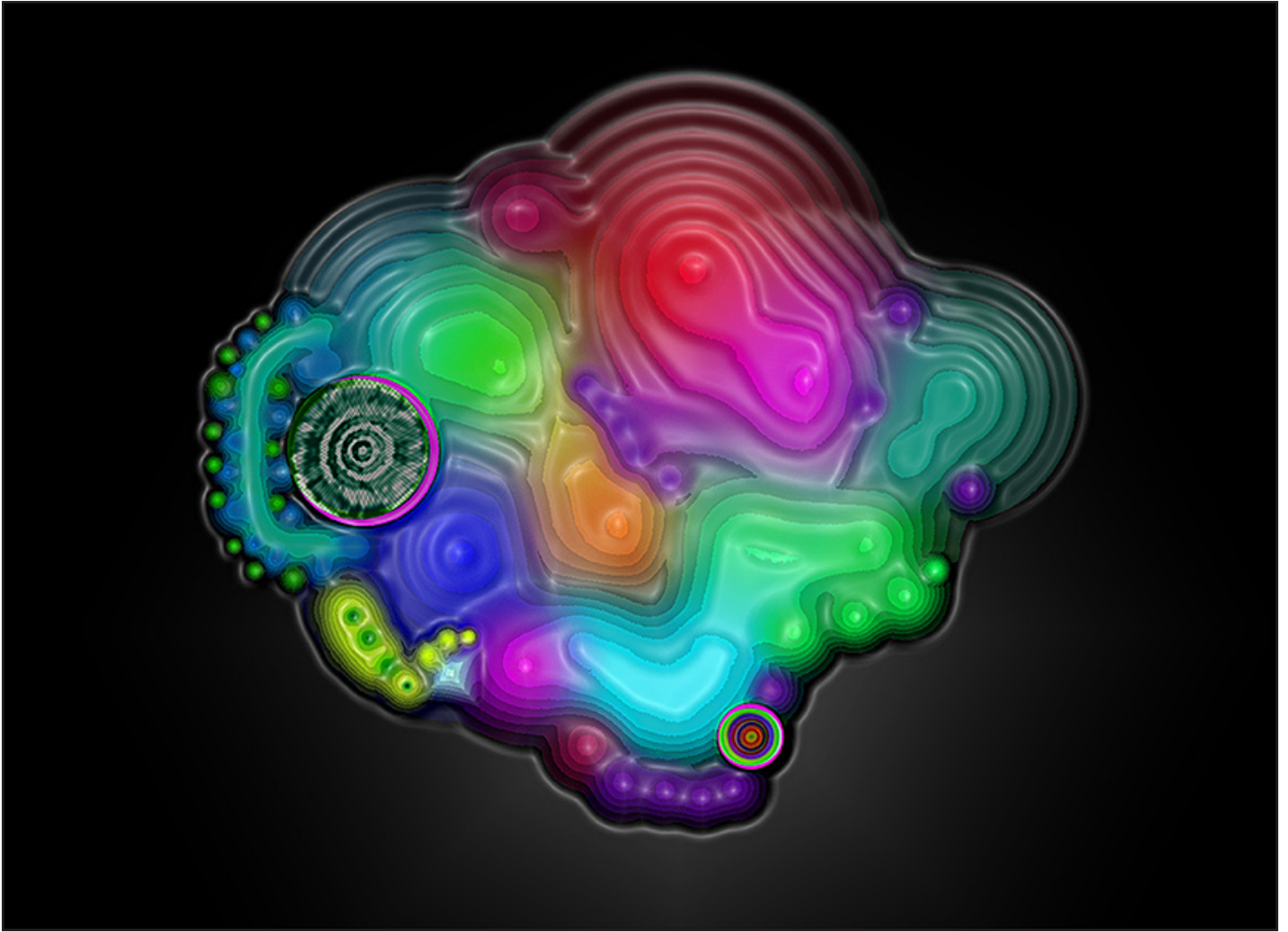
Cadavers

The asylum
receptacle for corpses not interred
for keeping
in their or his possession, charge, custody, or
control
authorized by law to and to
and the
and use it
and
he shall forfeit his claim and right
control and management
and shall deliver
shall dispose of the remains
in accordance with
its use and benefit.

By Cheyenne Marco

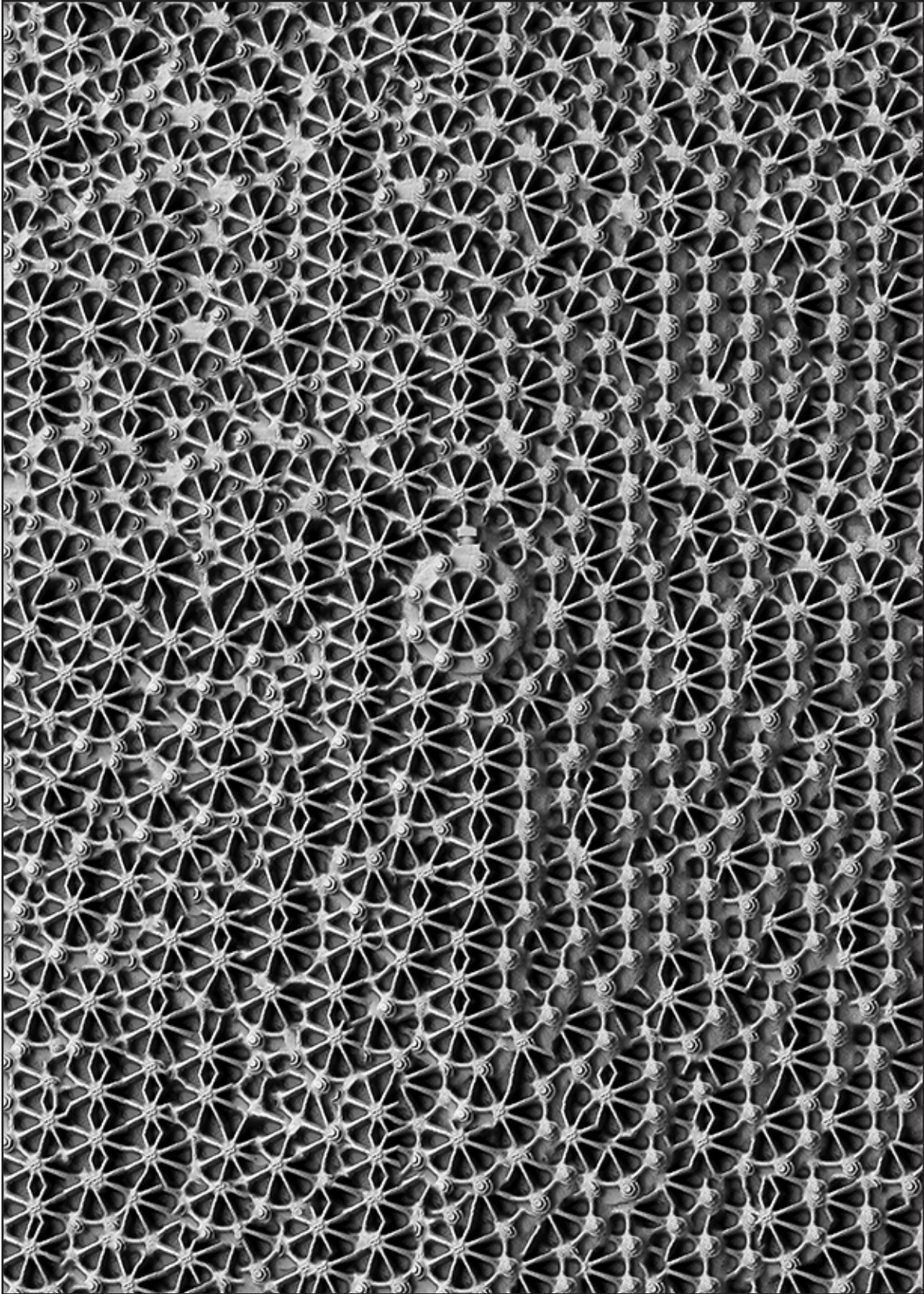
Cheyenne Marco grew up on a Minnesota poultry farm and finds inspiration for her writing in her rural upbringing. She teaches at USD, works on the South Dakota Review, does outreach for Friends of the Big Sioux River, and fantasizes about sleep. Her works have appeared in Lake Region Review, Vol. 1 Brooklyn; Turk's Head Review; and Prairie Winds.

Ribosome and Friends



Artwork by Hil Scott

Matrix B



Artwork by Hil Scott

Matrix B is a conceptual piece, more print making than photography. It's meant to convey a sense of the extraordinary complexity of medicine and the healing arts in our time.

Chicago Portrait no. 37: Herpes in the Botanical Garden

By Erika D. Price

First I went deaf. No one told me to expect that. It's very common during the first outbreak apparently. I woke up two hours late because I could not hear the digitized church bells I'd programmed for 8:15.

The right side of my head felt like it was jammed full of steel wool and wet insulation. The ear was just a useless mass hanging off the side, with no sensation in it. I saw a bird hopping on my sill, but no noise was produced when it opened its mouth.

Next was the tingle. It's the telltale sign. It was a hot, barbed feeling that began in my Cupid's bow and then radiated out in spiky waves up to my nose and down to the cracks of my mouth. Heat began attending the pain. A lump of flesh was slowly elevating above the rest of my face. By the time the bright crimson ball formed below the skin, I knew what was happening.

Then the fever came; 102 or so. I did not sweat but my whole face got hot. The campus wellness center was just down the street. Everyone in the lobby was bundled up in thick parkas that had gone dingy with years' worth of train filth. I turned my head away from humanity to hide the bright beacon of sickness on my face.

The nurse practitioner shined a flashlight on my mouth and clicked her pen. A gloved finger pressed against the colony of white pustules sprouting in a

spiral at the center of my upper lip.

"Yep, you have herpes."

They dropped their gloves in the trash and applied a liberal layer of antibacterial foam to their cracked hands. I sobbed but did not receive the hug I'd hoped for. The NP gave me a wide berth. I'd always read that herpes was common and not a Big Deal but their actions seemed to belie that.

My prescription was \$30. The pills were large, salmon-colored, and chalky. I dry-swallowed one at the bus stop and it caught in my throat. I was supposed to go to a conference at Northwestern that day. I changed my plans.

The CTA took me north to the boundary of the city. At Howard, a cemetery of century-old gravestones marked where Evanston began and Chicago ended. A tree on the outside of the cemetery had a plastic wreath and a wooden cross nailed to it. "Julio" was written on the cross in unsteady Sharpie. Next to the makeshift memorial, a streetlamp was bent. Julio was painfully close to the safety of the cemetery when a passing car struck him dead in the night. I doubt very much he is buried in those scenic, historic grounds.

At Davis and Church I waited beneath a glass awning for a twice-hourly PACE bus to arrive. My stomach felt spongy and full. I had not eaten yet that day. I often felt full and bloated back then, even if I'd gone twelve or sixteen hours without eating. I often aspired to not eat at all, but usually failed.

None of this had anything to do with herpes. One is often advised to feed a fever but all I had on me that day was herpes medication and a stray banana slowly blackening in my bag.

The PACE bus was immaculately clean and cushioned. The upholstery was bright blue with a jazzy orange and purple geometric pattern. It reminded me of the shuttle that takes tourists from the airport to Disney World, and from Disney World to the airport. On the way to Disney they play music and cartoons. They play nothing on the way back home.

The PACE went north for many miles, up Chicago Street, which only becomes Chicago Street after you've left Chicago. When it's in Chicago, Chicago Street is called Clark. The bus passed Northwestern's ivy-covered campus and the classically styled mansions that house its donors and administrators and sorority students. It drove on, through the woods and along the Purple Line tracks, until it reached the terminus in Wilmette. It drove past a dock full of bobbing sailboats, then cruised down a hill abutting a golf course. At some point, the bus took a left, carrying me west and leaving the lacy white exterior of the Baha'i Temple behind me in the distance.

The final stop was at a residential street corner, where a red-roofed mansion towered over tall hedges. There were no

Continued, next page

sidewalks or walk signals. I waited for the traffic to thin then ran across the road.

The Botanical Garden was massive but almost entirely dead at that time of year. Inside, I learned that the rotting corpse flower only bloomed when temperatures rose past 90 degrees. The English gardens were dull and drab, the walls browned, the vases empty. The peninsula of fruiting plants was bare, save for a decorative pumpkin made of fiberglass. The bee's houses were utterly still.

My whole face throbbed and stung. The NP had told me not to touch the wound, but I had never resisted popping a zit once in my entire life and that was not about to change. I wanted to watch my skin extrude many streams of yellow-white pus and feel the pressure change as poison seeped out of me. I wanted to feel fluid, hot and infected, as the virus spread and filled every available pore. I put on winter gloves to stop myself and walked past the Bonsai garden. With every step my face felt a painful subterranean sting.

I crossed a bridge to the island of North American foliage. A circle of perfectly creepy birch trees reached for the sky. I stepped inside their circumference and sat at a damp bench. They hid me from the entire human world the way no scarf, ointment, or makeup could. I followed the peeling alabaster surfaces of the trees up to the partially obscured winter sky and prayed. I wanted to feel and be completely different.

The prayer was not about the herpes, but the herpes was not far from my mind. It hurt too much. My lips were hot and ugly. The bright sores on my

face twinkled with viral, almost electrical pain.

I looked up at where the branches marred the sky and waited to feel better. I was there a long time, until a gardener came by and startled me. My eyes had gone as red as my lips.

My lips had always been his favorite feature. He said they were cute and wry and perfectly kissable. He never had much to say about me that was positive, so I had cherished that compliment.

I never told him that he had infected me, or that I had infected him, or that in all likelihood there was an unending and incurable sickness embedded in his spine, lurking and waiting for some weakness to take advantage of. I never warned him that someday an opportunity would present itself and the herpes would rise up and cleave a big red welt into his skin.

But when I saw him lurking outside my office, I did wash off my BB cream and give the wound a little squeeze, to make it bloom and darken so it could not be denied. When I spoke to him I jutted my chin out, forcing him to recognize my sickness. I like sickness when it is so intense that it cannot be denied, like a bloody eye or a burst lip or a tree covered in bright fungal warts or an evening of unceasing thoughts of death. When a problem is unambiguous, I find it oddly comforting. I'll take deafness and bright yellow pus over a dull ache any day. I prefer debilitating madness to mundane dysthymia. I liked it better when he was objectively violent rather than unsettlingly calm. When it's clear there's a problem, I can be sure I'm not making things up.

I knew that if he saw my open, seeping wound he would finally stop trying

"A circle of perfectly creepy birch trees reached for the sky. I stepped inside their circumference and sat at a damp bench. They hid me from the entire human world the way no scarf, ointment, or makeup could."

to kiss me. He would stop following me up Sheridan whenever I tried to take a walk. He would not dare to pin me down and press his groin to my torso or his lips to my open mouth. He would finally be repelled enough to control himself. I had tried smoking, getting a facial piercing, and yelling, but none of that would make him go away. It took a lush overgrowth of herpes to accomplish that.

That first bloom of herpes was many years ago. I only ever had two visible outbreaks. Both of them coincided with times he was in town. The virus will never leave me; I know it lingers, dormant and waiting in my back. I still feel the telltale tingles in my lips from time to time, a sprout begging to be watered. But I've learned to apply a generous layer of Carmex, to numb the pain to something below awareness. The tendrils of the virus shrink and curl up on themselves. They hide deep inside me until the time to grow comes back again. ✧

Erika Price is a writer and social psychologist in Chicago. Erika's work has appeared in Bacopa Literary Review, Literary Orphans, The Toast, The Rumpus, and has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize. For more of Erika's writing, visit erikadprice.tumblr.com.

Dhyanam (Meditation)



Artwork by Priyadarshini Komala

Visual art. Pastels and oil painting on canvas (18'x 24').

Priyadarshini Komala, a Washington, D.C., based painter, works on Indian identity, nature, self-reflection and womanhood. A software engineer by profession and an artist by passion, Priya deftly blends her geeky side with the creative one. She has exhibited her work at several art galleries in Washington, D.C., including the prestigious District of Columbia Arts Center and Circle Gallery. In addition, some of her paintings have also been featured in distinguished magazines and art Journals. Priya has a bachelor's degree with a major in Computer Science and minor in Studio Art from The American University in Washington, D.C.

Miscarriage

From “little death”
To little death
First breath
Not yet
Begun
Fleshy pendulum
Barely formed
From which new life
Was hung

By Sarah Gane Burton

Sarah Gane Burton is a recent MA graduate from Andrews University and lives with her husband, Kevin, in Tallahassee.

Intern Year

It's quiet in the mornings
As I walk the halls,
sometimes the lights are still dimmed
the doors all closed.
Then I pass by an empty room —
I remember you there, your daughter
lying in that same bed
that is now clean, the sheets new,
the corners pressed neatly.
Our conversations still ping off those walls,
your voice, your replies not fading
and that feeling, the immense space
between us as we stood together,
as I heaped word upon word.
I felt your world thump
and get caught in your throat.
And all the while, I was learning (from you) —
The path, unfamiliar to me,
and I couldn't tell who was leading.
I felt the weight of this job and I had
to apologize as I continued to stumble.
But you were a gracious teacher
and you thanked me as I left.
I fought the urge to confess,
to reveal, to betray my confidence.
Instead I walked away, back into my world.
I checked off your box on my to-do list.
There was a lab, or maybe an x-ray —
there was still something left undone.
The rest fades as I continue to make
my rounds.
I find my patient's room,
I knock on the door ...

By Megan Coe, MD

Megan Coe is a pediatric resident at the Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU Medical Center.

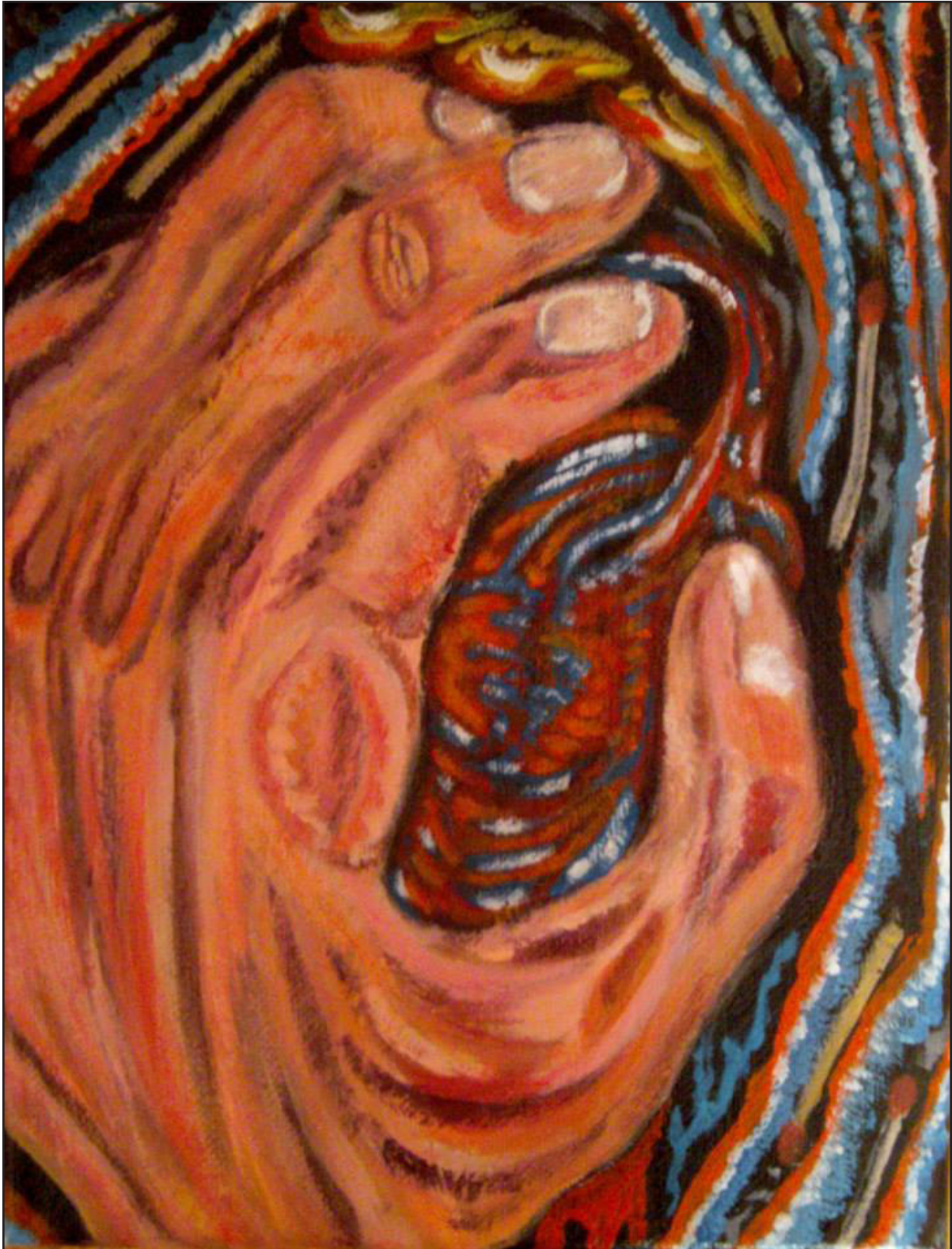
Waiting Room (Pulse)

Despite winter permafrost
Lodestones pulse sickly
A tachycardic eye
Yardsticks — an old glow espied
Through the shadows that frighten
Taught to fear them in the hospital
Here, where wreckage is strewn,
She did not know her number
I spend my life in waiting rooms
At advice bureau
Stalled but attuned to something there.

By Stephen C. Middleton

Stephen C. Middleton is a writer working in London, England. He has had five books published, including A Brave Light (Stride) and Worlds of Pain/Shades of Grace (Poetry Salzburg). He has been in several anthologies, among them Paging Doctor Jazz (Shoestring), and From Hepworth's Garden Out (Shearsman, 2010). For many years he was editor of Ostinato, a magazine of jazz and jazz-inspired poetry, and The Tenormen Press. He has been in many magazines worldwide. Current projects (prose and poetry) relate to jazz, blues, politics, outsider (folk) art, mountain environments, and long-term illness.

Steady My Heart



Artwork by Emily Lasinsky

This piece was created when I was experiencing much stress and anxiety. I felt like my heart was beating at a rapid rate. Painting calmed me down.

Emily is an artist, counselor, and seminary student from Pennsylvania. She enjoys integrating expressive arts practices as she joins others along their healing journeys. Much of her work is inspired by nature and meeting diverse people.

Into the ER, We Rush

into the river of her passing
she is almost nearly but not quite
gone from this place
the doctors have nothing to offer
we feel like addicts caught
in a trap of no veins no veins at all
and my useless friend tells me
that sometimes you must even condemn
a good building—what the hell
is the logic of that?
I turn from his mouth-cramp
and into the long pause of a thunderstorm
of a sudden silent hospital dark
the river of her passing

By Susan April

Susan April lives in Maryland. She holds an MFA from Vermont College and degrees from the University of Chicago (MS Geophysical Science) and the University of Massachusetts at Lowell (BS Environmental Science). As a Principal Scientist, she has worked on projects for the EPA, DOE, and state environmental agencies. Her poetry is forthcoming in Nuclear Impact: Broken Atoms in Our Hands (Shabda Press) and Heliotrope (Franco-American Women's Institute); previous poems have appeared in several journals and a collection of her writing was published by Loom Press (French Class, 1999).

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Flow



Photo by Derick Nelson Jenkins, MD

Derick N. Jenkins is a Chief Medical Resident in Internal Medicine at VCU Health Systems.